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Review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the United Nations

Common services at Geneva

Report of the Secretary-General*

I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 54/255 of 7 April 2000, the General Assembly endorsed, inter alia, the recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) contained in its report entitled "The United Nations system common services at Geneva, part I, Overview of administrative cooperation and coordination" (see A/53/787) and the comments of the Secretary-General and the Administrative Committee on Coordination thereon (A/54/635). Further, the Assembly encouraged the Secretary-General and the Administrative Committee on Coordination to take concrete steps to enhance common services, invited legislative organs of other organizations to take similar action on the basis of the resolution and requested the Secretary-General to report to it at its fifty-sixth session on the measures taken in that regard. The present report is submitted in response to that request. It describes, in section II, existing cooperation among specialized agencies and organizations based at Geneva and provides, in section III, an update of the progress achieved in setting up a more formal common services structure at Geneva.

II. Cooperation among organizations based at Geneva

2. It is worth recalling that, in spite of the statutory autonomy of each Geneva-based specialized agency and organization, significant collaboration has developed among their executive heads, resulting in increased contacts among counterparts at all levels in the various organizations. The results of those efforts are mentioned below by area of activity and described in a non-exhaustive way. The second part of the report of JIU on common services at Geneva (see A/55/856) examined the most significant manifestations of those efforts, namely, the International Computing Centre, the Joint Medical Service, the Staff Development and Learning Section (then known as the Training and Examinations Section), the Diplomatic Pouch Service and the Joint Purchase Service.

A. Budget and finance

3. Periodic meetings, some of which are organized through the secretariat of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, among senior finance and budget officers are held to discuss matters of common interest, such as projected inflation rates for Geneva, accounting standards, software for electronic payments, credit cards and banking arrangements.

* The footnote requested by the General Assembly in resolution 54/248 was not included in the submission.

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B. Telecommunications

4. Organizations exchange experience in negotiating advantageous telecommunication rates with carriers. As an example, Geneva-based organizations can benefit from the economy of scale created by the telephone network operated by the United Nations Office at Geneva. The International Bureau of Education of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, located at Geneva, installed a remote partition of the telephone system of the Office on their premises and benefit from all services while keeping their investment to a minimum. The United Nations Office at Geneva has also negotiated the fees for metropolitan links (i.e., optical fibres and leased lines) to interconnect its buildings. Other organizations, such as the United Nations Compensation Commission, the International Trade Centre and the World Health Organization, have decided to join the agreement. The International Labour Organization and the World Trade Organization are currently studying the arrangement in order to establish new links to the Palais des Nations at preferred rates. The United Nations Office at Geneva has just entered into a new contract with four operators for various telecommunication services, such as voice service, worldwide access to the Internet, toll-free numbers, remote local area network (LAN) access and virtual private network features. Other organizations and even field locations may join the aforementioned global contract, allowing better connectivity as well as economies of scale. Efforts are under way to share telephone directory information in compatible phone systems so as to simplify dialling and allow individual caller identification. The United Nations Office at Geneva is currently studying the possible implementation of a global telephony, for which a bidding process will be prepared. The contract envisioned will include the option for other organizations to benefit from the preferential rates obtained. A videoconference bridge has been deployed, with a total capacity of 12 sites simultaneously connected. The bridge is operational and can be accessed by any organization throughout the world, allowing any organization to establish multi-site videoconference sessions over regular connections but also over networks such as the Geneva Diplomatic Community Network (GDCNET). Progress is being made in the development of GDCNET, the facility provided by the International Telecommunication Union which links common system organizations and permanent missions, allowing users to listen to ongoing meeting activities in the conference rooms of other organizations or even to obtain video transmissions over the network. An audioconference service is also available from the telephone system of the United Nations Office at Geneva and can accommodate meetings held away from the Palais des Nations. The United Nations Office at Geneva is able to organize an audio and video webcast on behalf of other organizations. This is being done locally or remotely to respond to the specific needs of the organizations. This service was provided to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in South Africa. The United Nations Office at Geneva is also planning to expand the existing links with the International Computing Centre, allowing for faster throughput of data. This should enable all entities within the Palais campus network infrastructure to use the International Computing Centre's large-scale backup and restore facilities for their mission-critical applications.

C. Information technology

5. Organizations share the data-processing resources of the International Computing Centre and collaborate in its management, through their participation in the Management Committee of the Centre. Licensing agreements negotiated by some organizations for standard computer operating and applications software are made available to the other organizations, as are volume purchase agreements for the acquisition of information technology equipment; this facility is also accorded to permanent missions. Joint seminars have been organized to keep managers abreast of innovations and trends, such as e-commerce and Internet security.

6. Through the implementation of the Integrated Management Information System (IMIS), the United Nations Office at Geneva provides a computer system designed to address administrative tasks in an integrated framework. The Office has provided training and conversion assistance, and continues to provide support to both departments and organizations which have chosen to use IMIS. The implementation of the payroll module in 2002 will complete the cycle. Payroll services are currently provided using the ICC mainframe; this service will continue to be made

available after 2002 for those departments and organizations that have chosen not to use IMIS.

D. Travel and transportation

7. The United Nations Office at Geneva has traditionally processed travel documents for organizations at Geneva (mainly the United Nations laissez-passer). Experiments have been conducted for the sharing of freight-forwarding contracts, arrangements for the removal and shipment of personal effects and household goods, and joint travel agency contracts. Joint meetings among travel managers are held to exchange information and views as to the future strategy towards changes in the travel agent industry and the air travel market and to explore possibilities for joint negotiations with preferred air carriers for net fare arrangements and volume discounts. The United Nations Office at Geneva has linked up with the Task Force on Common Services working group on travel and transportation and participates in the preparation of requests for proposals pertaining to global arrangements for the removal and shipment of personal effects. The resulting contract will be open for other organizations and specialized agencies to join.

E. Medical services and insurance

8. Organizations collaborate in operating the Joint Medical Service. Several organizations share medical insurance schemes.

F. Security services

9. The United Nations Office at Geneva provides a full range of organized security services to two other agencies. Negotiations have taken place to provide such services under similar modalities to a third organization. The Office also provides ad hoc security support upon request to other agencies. Its Security and Safety Section participates actively in the Inter-Agency Security Network. It has taken the leadership in developing common training and career development programmes for United Nations security officers.

G. Procurement and contracting

10. The Joint Purchase Service at Geneva, whose secretariat is managed by the United Nations Office at Geneva, has existed since 1952. Virtually all specialized agencies located at Geneva are members of the Service, except the International Labour Organization which withdrew in 1998 for cost considerations. Informal contacts with that Organization give reason for the expectation that the agency will again join the Service in the near future. The Service, which has traditionally focused on the joint procurement of paper and office supplies, has recently decided to widen the scope of its activities and to exchange information on major service contracts, such as the cleaning of premises, and to explore possibilities of joint negotiations with the suppliers of such services. It has mandated the United Nations Office at Geneva to negotiate on behalf of its members a contract for electrical power, in anticipation of market deregulation.

11. Volume purchase agreements negotiated by the United Nations Office at Geneva for the supply of stationery and office supplies and for the purchase of personal computers and peripherals have been made available for use by other organizations. Some organizations are starting to include clauses in their general contracting provisions that oblige suppliers to extend the same preferential conditions to other United Nations organizations.

12. Organizations attend on a regular basis the annual meetings of the Inter-Agency Procurement Working Group and the meetings of its subgroups. The Working Group actively promotes common approaches to purchasing policies and the enhancement of professionalism in the procurement activities of agencies. This participation also contributes considerably to the exchange of information and to the establishment of professional contacts and cooperative ventures at Geneva.

H. Library and archiving services

13. All Geneva-based organizations have joined the United Nations System Electronic Information Acquisition Consortium that was established in 1998 and is led by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library in New York. This consortium makes commercial information products (such as *The Economist* Intelligence Unit,

NewsEdge etc.) available on desktops and in libraries throughout the participating organizations at a fraction of the price of individual paper subscriptions. The International Labour Organization and the World Intellectual Property Organization (through the United Nations Bibliographic Information System) have made the catalogues of their libraries available through UNCAPS (the United Nations System Shared Cataloguing and Public Access System), thereby simplifying access to this information by the public and reducing cataloguing time for new acquisitions by allowing participating organizations to retrieve the cataloguing information filed by sister organizations. The United Nations Office at Geneva is planning to contribute to the same project in 2002. The World Health Organization and the International Trade Centre have requested that their libraries be included as well. The International Labour Organization and the United Nations Office at Geneva (as well as several non-Geneva-based organizations) have pooled their information about the location of depository libraries and created a web-based search facility to simplify the process of finding document repositories throughout the world. Efforts are under way to expand the service to include more organizations and all field-based information centres. Projects of a similar nature have been implemented in the area of archiving.

14. Furthermore, the Committee of International Archivists at Geneva, in which representatives from most Geneva-based international organizations take part, was set up and has been working on a common approach to records and archives management, especially in the fields of archival preservation and appraisal. As a first step, efforts focused on training in connection with new technologies. Workshops on the preservation of paper and other materials (e.g., audio-visual, photographs and electronic records), as well as on the appraisal of electronic records, were organized in the biennium 1999-2000.

I. Management of human resources

15. Common system organizations jointly undertake salary and cost-of-living surveys at Geneva. They have worked out a common job classification standard for General Service personnel. A number of training courses, especially in the language area, are provided by the United Nations Office at Geneva and by the International Labour Organization. Some staff-related services are handled by the United Nations Office at Geneva on behalf of other United Nations Secretariat entities, as well as bodies affiliated with the United Nations, in particular those concerning relations with the host country for the provision of Cartes de légitimation, the administration of justice (Joint Appeals Board and Joint Disciplinary Committee) and compensation for work-related accidents (Advisory Board on Compensation Claims). On a more informal basis, the United Nations Office at Geneva and the other organizations at Geneva exchange curricula vitae, seek to assist with spouse employment and, within existing constraints, endeavour to assist when agencies downsize. Any efforts in this respect are made with due consideration given to the various organizational mandates and priorities, such as geographical and gender balance, and career development of staff on board.

J. Management of facilities

16. Under the auspices of the Fondation des immeubles pour les institutions internationales, a number of informal collegial contacts among technical managers of Geneva-based organizations have taken place to exchange information on building efficiency and related techniques. The recent creation, at the initiative of the Senior Project Coordinator, Common Services, of the Office of Central Support Services at United Nations Headquarters, of the inter-agency network of facilities managers, in which some Geneva-based agencies participate, also provides a permanent platform for the exchange of information, a comparison of best practice and other areas of mutual interest.

K. Mail and Diplomatic Pouch services

17. The United Nations Office at Geneva has always operated Diplomatic Pouch services for all Geneva-based organizations. Over the years, on-time performance has been constantly improved, many new Pouch destinations have been created and rates have been negotiated downwards, while the volume of mail transported and received has risen dramatically. The Office also provides mailing services to three other Geneva entities.

L. Conference activities

18. There have been long-standing arrangements for the sharing of conference space and for the rental of large facilities not available at the site of the organizing agency. There has also been consultation on the timing of important meetings in order to avoid unnecessary competition for space and other resources (e.g., interpreters). Agencies have negotiated joint rates for freelance interpreters under the auspices of the Consultative Committee on Administrative Questions of the Administrative Committee on Coordination. The heads of interpretation services meet on a regular basis to exchange views on common areas of concern.

III. Structured approach to common services at Geneva

19. In his comments on the above-mentioned JIU reports (A/54/635 and A/55/856/Add.1), the Secretary-General indicated that action would be taken to establish the Management Ownership Committee at Geneva under the chairmanship of the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, regrouping all organizations and agencies of the United Nations common system at Geneva. He indicated that it would be left to the Management Ownership Committee to determine the scope and pace of implementation of arrangements for common services at Geneva, with due regard for the mandates, roles, tasks and rules of each individual organization. The Geneva Management Ownership Committee has been launched accordingly.

20. The Management Ownership Committee is composed of the heads of all Geneva-based specialized agencies, the United Nations Office at Geneva and United Nations programmes, as well as of the World Trade Organization and the International Trade Centre, under the chairmanship of the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva. The Committee established a three-tier structure, as follows:

(a) Management Ownership Committee;

(b) Task Force on Common Services;

(c) Technical working groups, each dealing with one or more topics where common services would be desirable.

21. According to its terms of reference, the Committee is to (a) establish and maintain high-level support for and commitment to common services initiatives among organizations of the United Nations system based at Geneva; (b) provide executive direction to its Task Force on Common Services; and (c) review the progress report of the Task Force and take decisions on the related recommendations.

22. The Task Force on Common Services is composed of the heads of administration, or equivalent, of participating organizations and agencies. It continues to be chaired by the former Director of the Division of Administration at the United Nations Office at Geneva. The Task Force is responsible for: (a) recommending initiatives or actions which will lead to the establishment of a common service or the reinforcement of an existing one; (b) reviewing proposals and recommendations put forward by the working groups on common services; and (c) defining the degree of commitment of cooperation, participation and human and financial resources required from participating organizations.

23. The working groups are composed of technical representatives and resource persons of each participating organization. The working groups are responsible for: (a) assessment of critical existing central, shared or common services with a view to identifying areas of possible improvement in quality and cost-effectiveness; (b) review of the potential for expansion of central, shared or common services; and (c) recommendation of the specific actions to be taken, together with the timetable, estimate of resources required and definition of accountability for their implementation, including the identification of a lead agency or organization, where appropriate.

IV. Priority areas under consideration

24. The discussions held in the Management Ownership Committee and its Task Force have led to the identification of areas to be reviewed as a matter of priority, with a view to strengthening existing common services tools, or to developing new common approaches. Examples of these are provided below.

A. Joint Purchase Service

25. The Management Ownership Committee underscored the need to expand the functions of the Joint Purchase Service to cover additional procurement

and services areas. The Service is called upon to work on standardizing a greater number of goods commonly used among participating organizations and agencies in order to group purchases with external contractors. This approach should allow for the strengthening of the negotiating power of the participating organizations and streamline internal procedures, thus resulting in more competitive prices for better services. In this respect, the Task Force has decided to set up a working group on information technology equipment. Bearing in mind the fact that the technical specifications and level of services may greatly vary from one organization to the other, the working group has been requested to develop a pragmatic approach so as to ensure that the equipment retained is acceptable to most users.

B. Banking and travel services

26. Banking and travel arrangements are services that are traditionally outsourced by the various participating organizations. In these areas, the number of potential contractors is limited. Therefore, the Geneva-based organizations, with the exception of the World Meteorological Organization, use the same bank and travel agent, although the arrangements are not necessarily governed by the same terms and conditions. At the request of the Management Ownership Committee, its Task Force is currently reviewing the possibility of grouping existing contracts with the existing service providers in order to obtain more competitive rates. A working group is being set up to review the banking and travel services and determine a common approach on how best to negotiate the future arrangements.

C. Cleaning services

27. Concerted efforts are deployed to investigate new areas in which common services may be developed. The United Nations Office at Geneva has contacted all Geneva-based organizations in the context of the Joint Purchase Service, in order to share practice and experiences on commercially outsourced cleaning services, prior to launching its next bidding exercise, in late 2001, possibly jointly with one or more organizations of the system. Although it is acknowledged that the technical characteristics of the buildings managed in Geneva may significantly differ, the organizations and specialized agencies doubtlessly have similar concerns as to the cost and the quality of the services provided, environmental issues and user satisfaction.

D. Provision of electricity

28. Negotiations are taking place with the local electricity provider in order to obtain preferential rates, in the current context of preparations for the opening of the Swiss market to outside competition. The Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, as Chairman of the Management Ownership Committee and Coordinator for Common Services at Geneva, has initiated discussions with the Swiss authorities so as to obtain a favourable interpretation of the host country legislation and, in particular, to ensure that all Geneva-based international organizations are considered one single customer for the purpose of the agreement under consideration.

29. The cases described above are only a few examples of the commitment by the heads of the Geneva-based international organizations and specialized agencies to develop common services in all areas for the benefit of the entire United Nations community. Efforts will continue to be made to foster such arrangements and explore avenues of complementarity in other areas of common interest.